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Bangla Bhai slips into India

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogra

Bangla Bhai gave law enforcers the slip making it across the border into India in the early hours Thursday. Siddiqur Rahman alias Bangla Bhai, operations commander of the recently banned Islamist militant outfit Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), with one of his followers fled the police dragnet and crossed the border somewhere in Naogaon, several JMJB sources told The Daily Star last night. They, however, could not name the man accompanying Bangla Bhai. The sources in the JMJB Naogaon unit also said he will return to SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Train ride turns fatal from lack of repairs

Half the tracks rundown, number of accidents spirals up

PINAKI ROY

More than half of the country's 2,792km railway network has fallen in a state of appalling dilapidation, leading to over 500 accidents a year, making travelling by train a high-risk venture indeed. At least 1,500km train track is run-down and unsafe. "Except for some important tracks, the condition of most of the lines is really very bad," admitted a high official of Bangladesh Railways (BR). In just four-year time from 1998-99 to 2001-02, a total of 2,074 train accidents killed 266 people and injured 1,119. Of the casualties, 21 dead and 566 injured people were BR employees. Of the accidents, 358 happened in 1998-99, 456 in 1999-00, 552 in 2000-01 and 708 accidents in 2001-02, marking a sharp upward curve in frequency. In the last two months -- January and February -- already two people were killed and at least 230 wounded in four train accidents.

Despite the alarming rise in frequency of train accidents, the authorities continue to pay more attention to buying expensive locomotives and coaches than maintaining and repairing the rail tracks, BR sources alleged. M Abu Jafar, joint secretary (Railways) at the communications ministry, yesterday said, "I have been transferred here recently, so I cannot tell you much about the purchases done before. But I know six locomotives have come from Korea very recently." He suggested contacting the director general of BR, but he was not available. Most of the railway tracks were built in British colonial period, when train journey was considered the safest mode of transportation. After the independence the government has built only 103km new tracks. In the last year's deluge, about 285km rail line was severely damaged, while many more kilometres witnessed partial damages. But, sources said, the authorities did not undertake any appropriate repairing work. An official of BR engineering department said, "Our main lines are in good condition, but the branch lines are in pretty bad shape." The only good tracks are in the Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Sylhet routes and in Parbatipur. The rest are quite unsafe. "Several times in the past, the regulatory body warned that the branch railway lines were totally unfit for running trains on. We then proposed a Tk 350 crore project to repair and maintain the tracks, but the government did not attach due priority to the project in the Ecneec [Executive Committee of National Economic Council] meetings," said a top BR official requesting anonymity. Many of the 454 railway stations across the country are also in decrepit conditions and need urgent repairs. The BR operates 57 SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

Govt's mobile phone project faces further uncertainty

STAR REPORT

The fate of the BTB's (Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board's) mobile phone hangs in the balance despite the assurance of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia that the much-hyped cell phones will be commercially launched by this month. The project, under which 250,000 GSM (global system for mobile communications) phones are to be initially sold, ran into yet another snag as its employees threatened to resist moves to hand over the project to a state-owned company. The project, which is already faced with a number of problems, has missed the deadline for a full-scale launch on several occasions. The Bangladesh Civil Service (Telecom) Association, a forum of engineers and officers, demanded that the operation of the mobile project be run by the human resources of the BTB. A top association leader told The Daily Star they would resist the hand-over of the project to Teletalk, a state-owned company. "BTB's engineers and officers will take a hard line if the project is handed over to another company," he said, asking not to be named. SEE PAGE 11 COL 5

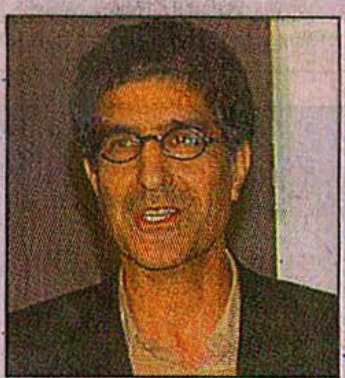


Human savagery

UNB, Cox's Bazar

Callous hunters in Ukha upazila attempted to kill an elephant by hitting it with hot iron rods after throwing powdered chilli into its eyes on Wednesday. The tormented animal, turned nearly-blind, slipped into a pond, clambered up after some time and repeatedly crashed into trees as it moved to and fro, crying in pain. Local people could not hold back tears to see the piteous sight. Forest officials said the injured elephant moved into the deep forest on Thursday, but they could not say anything about its latest condition. The ill-fated elephant entered SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

Rights abuse goes up for impunity



Abbas Faiz

Observes Amnesty; concern over spiralling religious militancy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Impunity is one of the major causes of continued human rights violations in the country, said rights activists at a press briefing yesterday following a three-day consultation seminar in the city. The participants in the seminar from home and abroad also expressed grave concern at the rising tide of violence including religious militancy and bomb and grenade attacks on political and cultural events. "Failure to investigate the threats, attacks, killings and bomb and grenade attacks and to bring the culprits to justice under present and previous governments contributed to these incidents," Abbas Faiz, Researcher on South Asia at Amnesty International, London, SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

Enemies using militancy to harm Islam

Nizami says

UNB, Dhaka

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Matiar Rahman Nizami yesterday said the enemies of Islam are proliferating militancy to harm Islam, asserting that there is no link between Islamic movement and militancy. "Bangladesh cannot be seen as an isolated case from present conspiracy against the Muslim ummah... Enemies of Islam are conspiring to strike a blow on Islam under a well thought out plan," he told a conference of regional party representatives at Sylhet Alia Madrasah ground. Nizami, also the industries minister, said the anti-Islamic forces are SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

DRIVE AGAINST MILITANTS Strain within coalition over govt crackdown

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The sudden but necessary move by the government to clamp down on the Islamist militants has created tension within the ruling four-party coalition, highly placed sources in the government said. They said the coalition leader Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is now passing a crucial time as the party high-ups are facing pressures from a particular alliance partner to stop the drive against the militants. The pressure further intensified as a section in the BNP itself, including some cabinet members, sided with the anti-clampdown group. Related story on page 12 Coalition partner Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) has asked the government to stop raiding Kawni madrasas (educational institutions that follow the 18th century syllabus of Deoband religious university in India) and harassment of its activists across the country. The BNP is now in a dilemma over the strategy to tackle the IOJ, which it had used as a vote bank to win the last general election. Whether the government continues with the crackdown or stops it to avoid a possible rift in the coalition will not be clear until the prime minister explains the government's stance in her wrap-up speech of the current session of parliament. "We are discussing the issue at the party high level to determine our strategy. If we continue with the drive it will hurt our coalition partner and if we stop it the donor SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

Bribes get prisoners hospitality at hospital

50 prisoners prolong stay at city hospitals; doctors turn a blind eye

NAIMUL HAQ and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

At least 50 prisoners are enjoying prolonged stays at different city hospitals thanks to special arrangements made allegedly through shady dealings involving physicians both inside and outside jail. Sources said it has become a commonplace practice for jail physicians to allow prisoners to stay outside the jail hospital. Many of the prisoners continue their stay for months in fact, reaping a relatively improved diet and certain facilities that would not have been available in prison. Once the prisoners get out of the jail hospital in the name of advanced treatment, they attempt to bribe the on-duty doctors at the city hospitals -- in most cases successfully -- to extend their stay outside the jail perimeter. Mohammad Anis, 25, a leader of a transport operators association (auto-tempo chalak sramik union) in the city's New Market, has spent the last two and a half years in various hospitals for a 'blood disorder'. He has been admitted to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) alone five separate times. He is now under treatment at DMCH's medicine ward no 22. Anis was arrested for extortion in SEE PAGE 11 COL 7



A prisoner of Dhaka Central Jail lies on a bed at Dhaka Medical College and Hospital yesterday.

AL reservation to create political turmoil

Moudud on caretaker govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed yesterday said the Awami League's (AL) reservation about the caretaker government system is intended to create political turmoil in the country. "The caretaker government system was introduced in the constitution on the basis of public opinion. But the constitution cannot be amended just because of an electoral victory or the defeat of a certain political party," he said at a roundtable at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday. The roundtable on 'Reform of caretaker government and electoral process: Recent thinking' was organised by Projonma Academy, a SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

Denmark waits on \$250m aid for better governance

UNB, Dhaka

As a grant of \$250 million in development assistance from Denmark is pending, Danish International Development Agency (Danida), like other donors, would like to see improved governance in Bangladesh. "Denmark has expressed serious concern at the deterioration of the governance situation, especially in law and order, political violence..." said Danish Ambassador in Dhaka Niels Severin Munk. Munk is one of the diplomats attending last month's donors' meeting in Washington, which made a critical reappraisal of the SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

AHMADIYYA Bigots plan to capture Bogra mosque March 11

BDNEWS, Rajshahi

Rajshahi branch of the International Khatme Nabuwat Movement Bangladesh (IKNMB) brought out a procession yesterday afternoon demanding of the government to declare the Ahmadiyyas as non-Muslims. The central leader of the organisation castigated the government at a meeting at Sonadighi crossing prior to the procession. The speakers announced at the meeting that they would lay siege to Ahmadiyya mosques in Bogra on March 11.

Summer holds dark prospect

Power crisis to deepen as no energy project implemented in 3 years

SHARIER KHAN

With the on-going load shedding set to shoot up to 1,000 megawatt (mw) this summer, the country's power situation would also remain bleak for the next few years since the government has failed to implement any major power plant and gas pipeline project in the last three years. Experts in the Power Development Board (PDB), Power Cell and power companies say load shedding will shoot even higher in the next couple of years since the government is not taking adequate steps to increase power supply. "Instead of increasing power generation capacity, the government has cancelled schemes like Sirajganj 450 mw project which was at its final stage, 210mw Khulna project, 150 mw Sylhet project that was earlier okayed by the cabinet and even 15 small power projects (with a combined capacity between 150 mw and 450 mw)," said a PDB source. Some projects are being re-tendered and they include the Sirajganj 450 mw project and the 15 small projects (second time) and Fenchuganj 90 mw project (sixth time). "Even if these projects are not cancelled again, they will not start operation before 2007 at the earliest," said a Power Cell source. SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

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